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ABSTRACT

Teachers should resist external pressures, such as the British fifth-form examination, which dictate the content and teaching methods of their classes. Instead, teachers should endeavor to keep literature, language, and composition integrated; to emphasize class and group discussions; to find topics that interest pupils, not examiners; to establish a classroom community where pupils can use language to explore and share their own perceptions; to foster personal writing; and to treat impersonal writing as important but subordinate to personal writing. In teaching literature, they should encourage students to read quickly as many novels as possible and, then, through general discussions and close study of passages, to consider in detail the more interesting ones. In poetry study, the writing of student poems, group readings of poems, and the teacher's oral reading to evoke immediate student responses can be productive. Techniques helpful in drama study are improvisation and group study of a Shakespearean play. Grammar and vocabulary can be taught in conjunction with other activities. During the last weeks before the examination, the teacher can review and comment on questions and ideas that the students have already explored. (LH)

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ENGLISH WITH AN EXAMINATION FIFTH FORM

ED037438

by

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ENGLISH TEACHERS show an uncharacteristic unanimity in their criticisms of external examinations. It is worth asking why this is, and how far such unsatisfactory examinations need constrict our work with fifth year classes. What we most commonly notice is the examination's failure to respond to what we have at best been doing during the previous four years. In these years most English teachers see their task as encouraging their pupils to use language to explore experiences of importance to them, confident that by so doing they will develop their language abilities. The teacher responds to their interests and needs as they arise in class, and feels himself responsible to his pupils as whole human beings. Any examination set and marked by an outsider is likely to seem an irrelevance, just because it does not relate to the context of these interests and needs, or at least not directly. Examinations necessarily define language not in human terms but as a series of external skills which can be tested. The danger that threatens English teachers—and calls forth that familiar shrillness of voice when examinations are discussed—is that they might come to accept this limited version of English as identical with their teaching task. It is not that the English teacher is taking upon himself the responsibility for moral education—though some do—but that our language development is so bound up with our development as thinking and feeling beings that we cannot develop the one without the other. Thus we are right in resisting the examinations' pressure to restrict our pupils writing to a narrow range of topics and manners, to exclude the writing of poetry, to overemphasise certain peripheral skills, to force the same books on us all, whether suitable or not. For these reasons, I shall argue in this article that we should delay as long as possible the solidifying of fifth-year work into patterns imposed by the examination.

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Some teachers are, one fears, so demoralised that they abandon the aims which have shaped their courses up to the fifth year and accept the examination's version of what English is. And when pressure from outside the classroom—but not always outside the school—urges this upon them it is

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hard to blame them. But are they right? Could it be that they are not only being irresponsible to their pupils' personal needs, but also denying them their best examination results. After all, boredom does not help one to learn, and who could be interested in practising examination questions, grinding set books, or writing stiff 'essays' about subjects of no interest to the writer, and addressed to a reader who does not expect to enjoy reading them? Does the external incentive of the examination really carry all of our pupils through that long year? It seems to me that examination results will be all the better if our fifth-year pupils become involved in a wide variety of language uses, planned and carried out by themselves alone or in groups, with one another for audience, and dealing with topics which they have helped to choose as of importance to them. If the examination formulae must be practised they should be left as late as possible, perhaps until the last month or so before the examination. The literature set books will be read—amongst others—but the discussion of them will not be in terms of the kinds of issues raised in examination questions. To all this the teacher of less able pupils may feel disposed to retort: 'It's all very well for you, but what about my pupils? If I don't coach them they'll fail.' He may be right—they're his pupils—but it is often the less successful pupil who is most easily bored—he has failed before, and has in any case a well-established suspicion of pie in the sky—and therefore most needs to see the point of what he is doing so that he can commit himself to it.

What does it mean in practical terms, then, to resist the bullying of the examination? Clearly it can mean different things to different teachers and different classes; all that can here be given is some indication of how one teacher has over a number of years guided his fifth forms in their work.

I believe it to be best to avoid splitting the week into one lesson poetry, one lesson writing, and so on, but instead to run them all together so that writing arises out of talking that has been provoked by a book or poem that has been read, which may itself have been relevant to whatever preceded it. This may best be organized by taking topics that can unite the pupils' interest in the life about them with the virtual experiences offered by poems, stories and plays, and not only those on the set book list. Two useful topics which arose from the books which we were reading were 'Machinery' and 'Being Alone'. (Of course I did not talk to the class of 'topics'.) There was a continuing conversation on each topic which lasted for a week or two, and which provided the context for most of our current work, class or group discussion and drama, and individual reading and writing. What is essential is that teacher and class talk and write not about 'what we ought to say in the examination' but about 'what you think about it', 'why I see it differently', 'what happened to me once', 'what it seemed like in the story'. The stress falls upon what an experience—real or literary—means to the pupils themselves, so

that the talking and writing becomes a sharing of real attitudes and experiences.

The word 'talk' is used here rather than 'speech' to make it clear that what is in question is not a special activity like a lecture but a normal human exchange which can continue outside the classroom. At times it will display an analytical bent which would justify the word 'discussion' but at other times it can allow the frankly personal and anecdotal. It would not be unfair to ask what will pose an intellectual challenge in this situation. Certainly the teacher's part in the discussion is very important, in asking central questions, insisting on further exploration, but the more unobtrusive it is the better. I have the impression that the most challenging discussions in my lessons have happened when a subject which I have opened has proved to be so urgent to the class that they have taken over the intellectual leadership. But we must not undervalue the mere presence of a trusted teacher, who implies by his behaviour that serious sustained discussion is both possible and valuable. On the other hand, as the more intimate and exploratory talk happens more readily in small groups than in the full class, much of the work will be done amidst a hum of small group conversation. Later groups will sometimes share what they have discussed with the full class, or perhaps move directly to individual reading and writing. These groups allow a more intimate, hesitant, exploratory approach to a new topic, which can then be shared in the more organized and explicit terms demanded by the relatively public discussion in full class, which itself can be the half-way stage to the full public explicitness of writing. This sequence seems to respond most closely to the stages of a child's journey into a new area of experience: the group discussion supports the class-discussion, which in turn supports the writing. If all the work is carried on through talk in this way, there will be no need for any special preparation for an oral test.

I have heard it said that some pupils just won't talk, especially about literature. Entirely withdrawn 15-year-olds who need medical help are fortunately few. When normal children do not talk we should perhaps ask ourselves: 'Is the topic (or the book) suitable? Am I joining in properly, and asking helpful questions? Do I listen attentively to what they reply, because I am really interested in their replies, or am I just going through the motions of questioning? Is the whole class too large a group for the more uncertain adolescents to take risks in talking about matters they have not yet sorted out for themselves. (Would I be willing to tackle a difficult new topic in front of a staff-room full of potentially critical colleagues?) Are they assuming that there is a "right answer" which they ought to know, and if so whose fault is it? Have I succeeded in building up an atmosphere for the frank sharing of interests, attitudes and experiences, free from heavy adult censoriousness?'

Any of these can hamper the growth of the classroom conversation, and it is out of this conversation that (I believe) all the other activities grow. It will be convenient in the rest of this paper to deal with the conventional categories one by one, but it should be clear from my examples that they are not separate activities in the classroom.

We must refuse to be bullied by the examination. For example we should steer our pupils away from the various stereotyped essay-subjects, the formal, the elegant, the pseudo-generalised. It is as often the wording of the topic which is at fault as the area of experience referred to. It is possible to write anything which is not nonsense about 'Uncles'? Yet a minority of our pupils might write their best on 'My Uncle'. Who can write with any interest on the advantages of living in town or country, or enter into a description of a circus or a busy main street? If we train our pupils on topics like these we are training them in insincerity, teaching them that the language of English lessons is stereotyped and distant from the realities of living. Few can handle exposition on topics such as 'Town-Planning'; the rest collapse into incoherent commonplaces, and no amount of advice about the planning of essays will help, since one cannot plan what is not there. Probably what they lack is the years of talk which have provided us adults not only with material, but also with an imaginary audience which we can summon up to prompt us with arguments and criticisms. Our pupils, when they face a blank sheet of paper, are more alone than we are, less surrounded by voices. The examiners' problem is that each pupil really needs a different set of topics; what we should avoid is importing the examiner's problem into the classroom by setting examination topics for our pupils' written work during their fifth year. Instead we should encourage any kind of writing that the pupil really means, stories, personal anecdotes, introspection, burlesque, anything he can write with passion and vitality. And it is no answer to say that examiners do not set topics that encourage passion and vitality. If our pupils have gained confidence and self-respect during a year's talking and writing in which they have learnt that there is some excitement in using language to share one's delights and fears, then they will be all the better prepared to breathe life into the good intentions that constitute the average essay paper. And we can reasonably hope for an assistant examiner capable of recognising such vitality. (Recently, however, a G.C.E. Moderator wrote to a group of teachers giving it as his opinion that, 'It doesn't matter what you give them to write about as long as they don't enjoy it'. Fortunately most examiners show a better understanding of the relationship of the quality of our writing to our ability to give ourselves to the task.)

We must, then, find topics for writing important to our pupils. And if we don't know what these are we find out from our pupils themselves, not

perhaps by asking them directly—though I have found this possible with classes I have known well—but by encouraging them to talk and observing what it is that catches their interest. Our pupils need a stimulus to help them to write. Occasionally when one has read a poem to a class and seen eyes light up with interest one can say merely, 'Write about anything which this makes you think of'. (Poems that have had this effect with my classes have been Treece's *Conquerors* and Lawrence's *Money Madness*.) But most of the time we need to help open up the topic for them by talking about it.

I have found the idea of a 'framework of choice' a useful one. (It was first suggested to me by Harold Rosen of the London Institute of Education.) We are not free to choose unless we can imagine a range of alternatives. Some pupils will ask, 'What does he want?' They see writing as a matter of fitting in with some pattern to be supplied by the teacher from outside. They have not yet discovered that language offers an almost limitless range of alternatives for creative improvisation. Saying to these youngsters, 'Write about anything you like' just sends them into a panic; 'Teacher knows what he wants us to write', they think, chewing their pens, 'but he won't tell us'. We can best help them through the classroom conversation, which opens up the possibilities of the topic and displays a potentially interested audience. Most important of all it reveals to the pupil that his own feelings, thoughts and experiences, all summoned up by the shared exploration, are valuable in themselves, and that he need not defer to an external pattern. That is, to supply pupils with a framework of choice is to free them to use language creatively, that is, in ways responsive to their own subjective needs rather than to an imaginary model.

Some examinations insist on relevance to a given essay title. If the teacher takes any notice of this—and it does not usually carry many marks—he should delay as late as possible the enforcement of strict relevance on his pupils. We want our pupils to use language to explore their own worlds, not to serve up pre-cooked meals. Insisting on relevance to a title once again suggests that there is an external norm waiting round the corner ready to pounce.

If we can build up in the class a sensitivity and respect for others it may enable the whole class to share some deeply moving experiences—and such sharing is unusual enough to be precious at any time of life. One extreme case of this arose from the reading of two stories and some poems; the stories were Lawrence's *Odour of Chrysanthemums* and Katherine Mansfield's *Daughters of the Late Colonel*, and the poems were connected with war and included Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est*. Not unnaturally the class talked only obliquely about some of the disturbing areas of experience related to these works; most of the discussion was concerned with exploring

the implications of death in the stories and poems, but we did talk about visiting relatives in hospital and about our reactions to other people's suffering. Afterwards I asked the class to write about any aspect of what we had been talking about and in any way; then in a sudden panic I added, 'Or about anything else you like', for a girl in the class had died in a road accident not long before and some of the boys and girls had been very upset. In the event, all used as their starting point the death of someone close to them, but only a few wrote about their classmate. One boy wrote movingly about his father who was dangerously ill. All the writing was honest, and most was above the pupils' average level of quality; I put this down to the way in which the class had already established in talk that it was possible to explore this frightening area. I think that the most searching piece came from Dan, who wrote:

UNCLE DIED

Uncle is dead.

Johnny and I remember,
when we were younger and lived over the shop,
the Sunday rides.

The mumbles, stumbles,
cough and spit.
The tight muffler, the Woodbines that made
the phlegm-sea tickle and splash.

But we moved.
Uncle became a fat obstacle,
parked in the largest armchair,
slippered, immune from sense and sensation,
gravy-stains on his waistcoat, fag-ash.
A burbling semi-domesticated animal,
another piece of furniture.

Sometimes he would wake and gibber Yiddish
till we called Dad
and he would tell Uncle that he must
speak English so that the kids could understand.

Uncle shrugged—and went back to sleep.

Uncle is dead,
there's no gap, no aching hole,
nothing.

Dad says we're all a bloody sight better off.
Is Uncle?
He could only be partly conscious of his own existence,
Sleeping when he was awake.
He never laughed at the T.V.
It was in English.

Those few paragraphs must serve as a caption for what I take to be the most important part of our work, the setting up of a classroom community in which pupils can experience the value of using language to explore and share their perceptions. We cannot feel that this is important only to those homes which do not provide enough of such experience; it might be said that no home provides enough of it. In this community, talk about literature and talk about life are inextricably intertwined, and lead to written work which at first may be equally undifferentiated. I regard this as the centre of the English teacher's work, and the other matters which I shall mention lie, I believe, further towards the periphery.

Not all of our pupils' writing will be of the personal kind which I have illustrated, autobiographical or fictional or poetic. We share with other teachers responsibility for the more impersonal kinds of writing, yet since our pupils spend so much of their time in other subjects in writing in the less personal modes I believe that the English teacher should make personal language his first responsibility. Yet this seems to imply too sharp a distinction between the two. The 15-year-old is more than ready to look out into larger worlds and to commit himself to passionate interests which may vary from the social to the scientific. But his or her approach to these enthusiasms may differ widely from the coolly analytical one favoured in many school subjects. It is in the English lesson that he can explore a topic for himself and make it his own. From this point of view all the writing done under the English umbrella should be 'personal' in commitment even if 'impersonal' in manner. In English we should avoid setting meaningless tasks as 'practice', since we lack even the excuse that we are teaching the content of a subject. This important principle must now be left thus inadequately dealt with, since I propose next to examine in detail a special case of impersonal writing.

Our pupils may have to face in their written examination some sort of summary. That special kind called 'precis' can—in so far as it deserves any rationale—be defended in two ways: it is not unreasonable to test pupils' ability to write impersonally; impersonal writing can be more fairly tested when the material is given than when a more chance-laden essay-title is set. It is the limitations which have been absurd in the traditional precis, the limitations of subject matter, of ways of presenting the material to the candidate, and of the kind of demands—explicit and inexplicit—made upon

him. It seems not unreasonable to ask our pupils even sometimes before their fifth year to read about something which interests them, and then to use what they have read for some other task, so long as what they are asked to read is within their imaginative grasp, and the nature of the task and audience is specified. But I would avoid talking to pupils about 'precis'; we read the passages because they are interesting, and perhaps relevant to what we have been talking about. And we reproduce it for some purpose, real or imaginary, not merely in order to prepare for an examination. It might be of interest to other teachers to give details of some pieces of work which have included summary. I always read the passage aloud to my pupils, instead of giving it in duplicated form; my voice helps them towards understanding, and not having the passage in front of them moves them away from details of phraseology towards a more generalised understanding. On the second reading they usually take notes. For example, we had been talking about education, so I read aloud the opening chapters of *Hard Times*—though without identifying it, since this avoids the irritating stereotypes roused by Dickens's name. Then we discussed what it was that the writer was criticising, and I asked whether what he said was true of education today. After further talk I asked them to write. They protested that they could not remember the passage, so I reread it while they made notes, and then they wrote, first about Dickens's criticisms, and then about the relevance of these to their own school experiences. There seems to be some point in helping young people in later adolescence to separate their own responses from those expressed by other people; this may be an unplanned difficulty in some tests of summarizing; I well remember a passage about popular music which was not summarized but transmuted by my pupils into their own attitudes. Another piece of work arose from some talk about emigration, which attracted some of the class; at this time I came across a *Listener* article about the status of women in Australia. I read the article to the class, simplifying and abridging it. After some discussion I told them to pretend to be clerks in the immigration department at Australia House, and to use the material from the article in writing a letter in reply to one from a woman who was considering emigrating. The third piece of work I have used several times, though only with mixed classes whom I knew to trust me. I put them in the position of the copywriter for an advertising agency who is asked by his boss to write a pamphlet for mothers of one-year-children. One of the agency's customers, a firm selling equipment for small children, proposed to advertise: 'Mothers! Have you a one-year-old child? Send for our pamphlet. . . .' Their boss told them to write a pamphlet of genuine good advice, but to mention—and illustrate—the firm's products incidentally. Some of the boys replied that they knew nothing about babies, so I said, 'That's exactly what you said to the boss, and

all he did was to give you this book and tell you to find out.' Then, having made a list of suitable products (playpens, high chairs, reins, etc.), I read to them the appropriate chapter from Dr Spock's *Baby and Child Care*—with, I must admit, some omissions. (When I received the pamphlets, each time I was struck by the acuteness of my pupils' perceptions of the devices used by advertisers, even though when I tried to persuade them to analyse them consciously they could not do so well). Work of this kind is, however, limited by the artificiality of pretending to write for an imaginary audience. In these cases however it did prove possible for my pupils to give themselves actively to the task. (It is worth noting that these tasks differed from the traditional precis not only in providing a context for the activity but also in that my pupils were required to use only those parts of the material which were relevant.) Work on summaries within the strict convention of, for example, a G.C.E. board can safely be left for the last month or so before the examination, since the kind of summarising I have outlined provides better practice because it means more to our pupils.

I have already implied in my paragraphs about talk the great importance of literature in its context in the classroom conversation. Most of our pupils will either be taking a separate paper in literature or—more justifiably—writing about literature within an examination of the whole of English. For this reason, and because a large part of my own teaching has arisen out of the literature we have read together, I shall devote most of the rest of this article to literary studies. *This article will be concluded in our next number.*

ENGLISH WITH AN EXAMINATION FIFTH FORM

by

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I have come to believe that when a class reads a book at the same time—and is therefore able to join in developing a response to it—the teacher should not try to hand over to his pupils a ready-made adult response. This is partly because he will fail in any case, though some pupils will be able to mock up a fair imitation, but more because he is all too likely to damage some pupils' ability to take literature seriously by excluding them from an experience they are not ready to share. It is useless for the teacher to be having an aesthetic experience out at the front if his pupils are fighting in the back row. Our pupils' responses must be summoned up out of their past experience by their own efforts; our task is to encourage this by making it possible for our pupils to explore together what the poem, novel or play can mean to them; we may be able to contribute some of our own perceptions to the exploration, but it may be more important to encourage them, at least upon first reading. Perhaps we should be grateful for any response; in the past the enemy has so often been a total apathy, fostered by unsuitable literature and unsuitable adult demands. And this can happen all too easily if we allow the examination to persuade us to demand adult attitudes and an adult manner whenever our pupils talk or write about literature. If we insist too early on the impersonal and formal manner of adult criticism we encourage insincerity. I believe that when a whole class shares a poem or story—and this leaves to one side the wide individual reading which we should be encouraging as much in the fifth year as earlier—what is happening is that we are building up a class response through talk. That is, a child's response does not end with the reading, but can be extended and deepened by sharing with others, his contemporaries as well as the teacher. Undoubtedly this response will not be taken in and made their own by all pupils equally, but all will share it in some degree, and it will give special support to those who on their own find it hard to commit themselves to the experience of a work of literature. What I am saying about this shared process is probably no different from what many teachers aim to do in the third

and fourth years; I urge them not to abandon this aim in the fifth year.

One of the prime dangers of external examinations is indeed this, that they interpose themselves between the teacher and his best perceptions of his pupils' needs. How many books do your pupils read in their fourth year? Perhaps twelve would be a moderate estimate, not counting the large number they read entirely on their own. Set beside this, the G.C.E. prescription of three or four books is nothing short of scandalous. Driven by anxiety for 'good results' some teachers may spend a whole year grinding these few, a practice that almost certainly defeats its own ends by killing any interest the books may have originally had. It is better to visit the books and then return to them later for closer attention, in the meantime reading other works, chosen to catch the interest of the class. Perhaps still more inevitably self-defeating is the practice of beginning work on G.C.E. or C.S.E. set books during the fourth year: not only will class and teacher be most heartily tired of them after two years, but books chosen to stretch fifth-formers are not likely to be suitable for fourth-formers. At worst, what later might have been a pleasure becomes a meaningless drudgery. We should always remember that if our pupils leave us with no memories of pleasurable discovery but only a stale taste in their mouths, we have failed as literature teachers, whatever else we may have done.

We should, I believe, support those C.S.E. boards who are searching for alternatives to the prescribing of texts for examinations. Ideally we would wish our pupils to read as many books as possible in their fifth year, so that we could watch for those which fired their enthusiasm, and choose these for deeper study.

In approaching set-books, I have found it best to start with as quick a reading as possible. I work out with my pupils a reasonable average reading time, allow so many lessons and homeworks, and they agree to finish the book by such and such a date. Weaker pupils may need more help, perhaps having parts read aloud to them, and other parts, on this first reading, omitted. The purpose is to get a rapid overall view. Then follows an open discussion—and by this I mean discussion and not monologue—exploring in the class' own terms what the story, poem or play meant to them. My purpose is to help them to bring up their own relevant experience to body out the work; the meaning of a work of literature can come from nowhere else than each reader's own experience, and each of our pupils must construct his own meaning at the bidding of the author's words. The discussion, which might be carried on first in groups and then in full class, is guided by whatever in the story the pupils have found important—or for that matter puzzling or objectionable—on first reading. Whatever different perceptions I as an adult have to offer can wait until later, though I join in the discussion in their

terms. Any written work at this stage will be either the writing of stories or poems stimulated by our reading, or general exploration of the whole work, determined by the individual pupils' interests. The critical examination of specific issues can be left until later. Nor will the general exploration necessarily be confined to the work; just as the conversation linked literature with life, so can the two be explored together in the same piece of writing. This kind of discussion can be encouraged by giving groups questions such as these: (*Pygmalion*) 'How do you tell what background the people you meet come from? Can you remember meeting a stranger recently? What could you tell about him? What differences does Shaw think are shown by differences of accent? Does this fit with your experience?' (*Silas Marner*) 'Have you ever left the place you have lived in, even for a short time? What was it like? Was Silas Marner's experience like this, or was it different in some ways? How did it affect his later life?' This is likely to lead to discussion which deals with both the text and the pupils' experiences and attitudes; at times it will be particular—anecdotal or explicatory—and at others it will move towards generalization. Indeed, strict literary critical relevance seems to be a very adult convention, and quite unlike the way in which young people approach literature; the mixed mode, in which the discussion moves to and fro between literature and life, has an important function in leading our pupils towards a more adult ability to separate one from the other.

When we revisit a set book later in the year it is probable that we shall need to examine it in more detail, though not all books set deserve or reward such attention. But it would be intolerably boring to try to go in detail through a whole novel or even short story. What best serves our purpose is to examine in detail a few key passages related to central themes of the work. What I am envisaging is not a 'test of comprehension' but a genuine discussion of what the pupils are able to perceive to be going on in the passage, in which the teacher should be ready to acknowledge that his pupils must in the nature of things perceive the passage differently from him, and in some cases see that which he has missed. Passages that have particularly repaid close study with able pupils have been the opening of Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*, in which images of isolated authority open the central issues of the tale, and the passage from Lawrence's *Odour of Chrysanthemums* in which Elizabeth Bates's deflation of her children's enthusiasms over the chrysanthemum and the fire establishes our first perception of her personality. It is worth noting, however, that not all prose works respond to this treatment; *Animal Farm*, for example, is not closely textured enough to sustain such examination. Usually I have one of these key passages discussed first in groups, with questions on the blackboard—questions very different from

those in the examination—and then in full class, but not necessarily just following my questions, since some groups will, if their discussion has gone well, raise issues which the teacher has not foreseen. The questions which I would give to the groups tend towards these patterns: 'What's that in for? What would *you* think of someone who said that? Is there anything else which belongs with it? Whose point of view is expressed here? How do you know that it's not the author's? What are we meant to feel about this? Did you expect this to happen?' Later in the full-class discussion I repeatedly challenge assertions with demands for evidence, which send them back to the text. The groups make their joint exploration orally, though I sometimes find it useful to tell them to make notes of their discussion, since these will help the less confident ones to take part in the class discussion. I take the purpose of this work to be twofold: to combat skimming, and to deepen the whole story by moving from a sharpened perception of details to a fuller perception of the whole. It is by something of an act of faith that one believes this to be a means of extending one's pupils' ability to respond to other works. I have always, however, had to check myself from indulging in too much the detailed discussion of particular passages; *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, is so rewarding to close analysis that I have come near to turning a whole class against it by spending too much time upon close study. But if it is not overdone such discussion has the breath of life in it; on the other hand, character studies, the reproduction of the 'contents' of literature as if they were factual, the close study of the obscure and uninteresting parts of a work in order to forestall an imagined examiner, all these assume that the work is dead, a meaningless corpse. When it comes to the examination, the kind of talk which I have described will prove to have provided the best possible preparation both for literature questions and for the new kind of comprehension test, just because it involved the pupils in an active exploration of the relevance of the literature to them.

What I have so far written of literature is perhaps more relevant to novels and stories than to either poetry or plays. It would not perhaps be an exaggeration to say that in the teaching of poetry our greatest enemy is the assumption that poetry provides an alien experience, that it belongs to 'Them'. We can only hope to succeed with the often very difficult poetry set for examinations if we have already shared with our pupils years of joint reading and discussion so that they will trust us that the early struggles will finally bring out a meaning relevant to their own interests and urgencies. Thus I assume that in the lower forms pupils have been encouraged to make poems their own by choosing them for performance, recording, discussion, wall-displays and private notebooks. Their own writing of verse will have shown them that symbolic presentation is in its own way as valid as narrative or discursive

argument. Their teacher, exercising self-restraint, will have avoided presenting his necessarily more perceptive reading as if he had access to 'hidden meanings' in poetry, hidden meanings forever beyond their reach. It is I believe essential that in the fifth year such approaches to poetry continue; we should not let the prescribed anthology either dictate every poem we read nor confine us to an academic approach. Poems other than those set should be read, especially ones with a sharp appeal to our pupils' world; for example, a classroom mention of Vietnam should not be allowed to pass without a reading of D. J. Enright's *Brush Fire*. As adults we know that such poetry has a wider applicability than its topical reference suggests, but we should not therefore miss the opportunity of showing that poetry can speak to our needs here and now. When we do turn to the set poems, some of which may be very distant in language, imagery and assumptions from our pupils' here and now, it is a temptation to spend longest on the poems which they most 'need help with'. I believe this to be ill-advised: there seems to me to be every reason to give what time we can to just those poems which—immediately or upon later rereading—we expect to give most to our pupils. These are the ones which they will remember and be able to write about with enthusiasm when the examination comes.

A useful approach to a new group of poems is to hand over to the pupils the task of preparing a reading. In groups of about four they 'choose two poems for group reading to the class, using any methods which seem to suit the poems'. In choosing their own two poems from all the possibilities, discussing how to perform them, performing them and hearing the performances of other groups, they can in a double period read or hear 12 or more poems, some of them several times over, and begin to talk at their own level about meaning and interpretation. Even closer attention can be encouraged by having the class make a tape of the poems for another class.

I have often detected in myself a restless desire to force my pupils to a critical response. Perhaps we should more often just read poems to our pupils —carefully choosing ones likely to make a relatively immediate impact— leave a moment to see whether there is any comment, and if there is none just go on and read the next. Nor should we inhibit informal remarks to neighbours; an adult's first spoken response to a new poem is rarely a public critical statement. And as with prose works, we should not at first insist on strictly critical writing: a parallel piece of writing may be as fully articulate a response as is appropriate to a first reading. For example, I did not feel dissatisfied when, after I had read a group of nostalgic poems to the class, Jane wrote:

TO BE A NOBODY

Can you imagine
What it is like
To stand high above the world,
And watch
The people move like ants all day.
And at night
To have bright lights
Shone in your face, and you
Are unable to close your one seeing eye
Which becomes almost blinded
Like the other.
  Have you ever thought
Of standing on a tall pedestal
Open to all weathers
As on a plateau
But with nothing to shield you.
The countless birds
Have no respect
And slowly cover you from head to foot
In white.

I often wonder
About being down there again
To be among the ants
And move around the streets
As one wishes.
To shelter when it rains
And keep warm in winter.
In summer
I watch, with envy,
The people walking in the parks
Enjoying the sun.
While I stand and swelter
In my overcoat.

I would willingly part with the wonderful view,
The deeds that placed me here,
On this pillar of fame,
To be a nobody
With his feet on the ground.

When I have wanted direct written comment even upon the first reading of a group of poems, I have usually preferred something other than detailed critical writing which at this age tends to be for most pupils a second-hand

activity, done off the top of the head. If we ask, 'Which of the poems about towns seems most like life as you know it, and which least? What makes you choose these?' their comments, though brief are at least first-hand. Later, discussion in groups and in class can help them to build the more precise and explicit response upon which they will be able to base examination answers.

Drama faces us and our pupils with an added problem. Most teachers would agree that ideally our work on a play, including a set play, should begin and end with visits to performances. But this is not a sufficient recognition that plays are to be acted. Plays are not black marks upon paper; they can only properly be represented in voice and movement. To 'read a play' fully in private is a very testing activity, difficult for most adults. Our pupils need to reconstruct the text in their imaginations, and the best way to this, I suggest, is through reconstructing it with their own voices and bodies. There is no opposition between a 'dramatic' approach and a 'literary' approach: if our pupils cannot apprehend the work as a play they can hardly attain to a 'literary' response to it.

How, then, can we teach our pupils to interpret scripts? I do not think that it is wise to read a play, even for the first time, with the pupils sitting in their places, since this tends to make the play seem academic, a matter of 'study.' rather than response. Nor have I found it satisfactory to have a small group reading the play at the front of the class; the readers, unprepared for an audience, act only with the voice, if that, and too many of the class, inactive, become bored and half-attentive. I judge it best to have all of the pupils active for as much of the time as possible, and this is much easier if in previous years the class has become used to drama in groups. First I would aim at a quick run through the play: some scenes would be read and acted by the whole class in pairs or larger groups, a few suitable scenes would be read by picked readers who had been warned in advance, and other scenes I would skip, summarizing rapidly. The main purpose of this would be to gain an overall impression in preparation for the kind of general discussion described above in connection with the novel. Later we would return to the play for more detailed study.

Introductory improvisation can often help pupils to an imaginative insight which will allow them later to recreate more fully a scene from a play. Like certain kinds of classroom talk about literature it can help pupils to bring relevant parts of their own experience to bear upon the comprehension of the literary experience. For example, a class was revisiting certain scenes of *Henry V*, including the scene between the French noblemen before Agincourt. They were in groups perhaps five strong, and had been asked to act the scene, but they did so standing still and with inexpressive voices. I asked them what was going on in the scene, and their answers showed that in a sense they

understood that the polite banter disguised malicious rivalry. I asked them where in modern life such banter occurred, and they suggested it occurred at ladies' tea-parties and amongst men waiting for an interview. (I don't know how the boy who suggested this came to know about it.) Next they improvised modern scenes of this kind, and then returned to the Shakespeare with a more inward appreciation of what was happening in the scene.

More sustained group-study of a Shakespeare play has also proved valuable. I have several times divided a play into six or seven sections and have given each section to a largish group to prepare over a sequence of lessons and homeworks, perhaps most of ten days' work in English. Each group finally performs its section to the rest of the class, answers questions of detailed meaning and general interpretation, and leads a discussion of the function of the section in the whole play. I have found that there is much to be gained in throwing this much responsibility upon the pupils themselves; some groups, however, will need a good deal of the teacher's help, as much to sustain their morale as to help them to ask the most rewarding questions. The final discussion of each section allows the teacher to express some of his insights, but with an added relevance and force.

Earlier in this paper I urged the postponement as long as possible of work limited to the framework of examination questions. In literature too it is best to ignore for as long as possible the kind of questions set by examiners, since these are designed to be easy to mark, and we ought to be designing the tasks we give our pupils to help them develop their responses to what they have been reading. At all times we should avoid the purposeless 'character study', and the testing of knowledge of the more obscure parts of the books read, as if literature were made up of a factual content to be learnt. The requirements of a mass examination often induce examiners to set questions inappropriate to the ways in which adults, not to mention adolescents, approach books. We should not allow examination stereotypes to inhibit class discussion, and should ignore them until a month or two before the date of the examination. Even in the last month, when direct preparation for the examination is unavoidable, I believe that it is still best to throw the main weight of responsibility upon our pupils by asking them to collect material related to central topics by way of preparing for their discussion in class. We should try to avoid projecting on them a 'right answer' approach; once they discover that their own approach, however divergent from the teacher's, is valued by him and by one another, they are free to throw themselves more wholeheartedly into the work. It is in the class discussions at this stage that I find that my own contributions are most telling, because they come as solutions to problems already half-solved by my pupils themselves. Often the teacher's part is to prompt with helpful questions, to underline what

pupils have said, perhaps rephrasing it to make it more available to the others. At this stage I encourage pupils to take notes not only of work done individually and in groups, but also of our full-class discussions, yet I still avoid dictating my own response as if it were definitive. Perhaps I have been over-delicate in this, but, if so, it is because I early discovered in myself the desire to impose my world upon my pupils, an endeavour doomed to failure in most cases and to harm in the rest. In the last analysis, our pupils must read for themselves; we cannot do it for them. What help we can give must be given tactfully, in the shared exploration of the classroom conversation. I remember one fifth form which carried three contradictory interpretations of *The Secret Sharer*. One had come from a colleague, one was mine, and one had arisen from a group in the class. The fluidity of this kind of discussion can be a strain upon some pupils, who may need help with their note-taking: it can be helpful after a discussion to ask: 'Well, what ought we to keep of all those ideas? What have *you* got down, Geoff?' and then to move the class into a summing-up discussion, to determine which are the most significant issues which have been raised. This is useful, not only in determining critical priorities, but in examining the implications of different ways of phrasing a note. It is at this stage that I would first introduce the idea of relevance to a critical question. As long as possible I assume that what they want to talk about is relevent to their response to the work in hand, but the examination demands a more public relevance which must be explained to them. And it is at this stage that the earlier insistance upon 'Prove it!' is repaid.

As all this work on the literature is done by the pupils themselves and not dictated by the teacher, it not only prepares them for the literature examination but the language examination too. Certainly it encourages the development of the attitudes and skill appropriate to composition and comprehension, and possibly to summary also. It will be clear that much of the work throughout the year was 'language' and 'literature' at once: works of literature, whether prescribed or not, provide an initial stimulus for the exploration in talk and writing of the pupils' experience, real and imaginary, and this in turn feeds their response to literature. What I am saying is that although at first glance the course I have described seems 'mostly literature', the activities were not by any means confined to the critical study of texts. And there were many occasions when I raised—or allowed my pupils to raise—topics such as 'education' which, pursued first for their intrinsic interest, later provided a supporting context for literature. We all know of relatively able pupils who never read fiction; perhaps one of the reasons for this may be that unlike most of the language we use each work of literature has to build its own context, and cannot depend on the support of the situation in which we meet it. If this is a problem for some pupils—and not

only the able ones—we can best help them be setting up in the classroom a context in which works of literature can find a place.

I have not mentioned grammar, or those other little exercises which still appear on some examination papers in the vain hope that language skills can be split up into simple testable elements. I believe that to teach most of these separable skills repeatedly is a waste of time. Even with punctuation, which to some extent does have to be known consciously and separately, we all have known classes who were able to do punctuation exercises but did not punctuate their writing accurately. I do not mean to say that linguistic table-manners are unimportant, though I believe them to be of strictly secondary importance. We can ask two questions: 'Do the children know the rules?' and 'Do they feel a need to apply them?' Clearly the rules must be taught, and it is probably best to do so at the blackboard when the need arises in the course of some written work. It is much harder, of course, to see to it that our pupils write for an audience whose opinion they really value; if we can do this we shall encourage them to improvement not only in punctuation but in more important matters. An audience of one teacher is possibly not an ideal one; many adolescents will feel more urgency to communicate with one another, and to win one another's respect. It is this kind of audience that is likely to call the best from some of our pupils, and we can help them to feel that self-respect requires accuracy. What is all too likely to happen when a teacher tries to teach standards of accuracy purely by his own pressure, is that his pupils will come to believe that accuracy is more important than the true values of writing, intangible as they are. It is hard to encourage accuracy by creating a classroom audience, but punctuation and other exercises are no substitute. If we find that such tests occur in the examination, we shall do well to postpone attending to them until the last moment. For example, it is almost impossible to increase a child's vocabulary by teaching him words. If the examination includes silly questions supposed to test vocabulary, the best we can do is to see that our pupils read widely, and at the last moment to warn them of such hoary regulars as 'uninterested,disinterested'.

I take it that our central task as English teachers is to help our pupils to use language to come to terms with whatever in their lives presses urgently upon them. If this is true in the fourth form it is true in the fifth form, and we are shirking our responsibilities if we allow an examination to deflect us from this. Nor do I believe that this will imperil our pupils' future: their examination results are likely to be better not worse if their fifth-year work in English has actively involved them in using language for purposes that they find meaningful.

(*The first part of this article appeared in our previous issue.*)